



OUT OF THE CLOSET: DISCLOSURE OF LGBT YOUTH EXPERIENCES

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ABSTRACT

Coming out in the open for LGBT youth is one of the most challenging parts of their journey. Disclosure of gender preference in family, school and community can lead to either acceptance or rejection. The study sought to describe the challenges experienced by LGBT youth in ISU-Cauayan City, to determine the responses of their family, school and community and how the responses affected LGBT youth in terms of academic performance. Likewise, it also described the coping mechanisms of LGBT youth in the process. The researcher used a qualitative research design through an in-depth interview and utilizing the focus group discussion as a means of eliciting responses. Thematic analysis was used and responses were coded and clustered according to their inherent meaning that respondents gave them where emerging clusters or themes formed an idea of an experiences, responses and coping mechanisms of LGBT youth. The researcher unveiled the challenges experienced by LGBT youth such as family acceptance, family rejection, homophobic bullying and discrimination. Results of the study showed that most of the respondents received positive and affirming responses from family, school and community while only few received negative feedback. Findings of the study likewise indicated that experiences of LGBT youth affected their academic performance in a positive way. Participants revealed that they used these coping mechanisms for their survival as they received support coming from LGBT friends and learned to ignore negative reactions. Data indicated that nowadays acceptance of LGBT youth is continuously increasing and becoming more acceptable in the society.

Keywords – LGBT youth, disclosure, acceptance, family support, coping mechanisms, homophobic bullying

INTRODUCTION

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender or commonly referred to as “LGBT” face different challenges in their lives as they came out in the open. Disclosing to one’s sexual orientation or “coming out” may be the stress-provoking life experience for LGBTs whose sexual preferences or orientations are not considered to be widely accepted. According to Katz-Wise, et.al., (2016), family acceptance or rejection of LGBT youth, either actual or anticipated, is considered vital in understanding the experiences of youth on the impact of stress and how they cope with the same. Coming out for LGBT youth is a

challenge. Disclosure in family, school and community can lead to acceptance or rejection. Even though it can be scary, most LGBT youth people feel that coming out is important as it means they can be honest about how they feel and not keep an important part of their life hidden. The study sought to answer the challenges experienced by LGBT youth, to determine the responses of their family, school and community and how the responses affected them in terms of academic performance among others. Likewise, it was also directed to determine the coping mechanisms they adhere to in the process.

Previous literature on this subject would confirm that several attempts have been conducted to understand sexual orientation and gender identity-

related health disparities among youth. Thus, it has been concluded that sexual minority youth experience stress brought about by society's stigmatization of homosexuality. This "gay-related" or "minority" stress is experienced at the hands of others and perceived as victimization. As a result, LGBT develop negative attitudes toward homosexuality, known as internalized homonegativity or homophobia. (Katz-Wise, et.al., 2016)

While proliferation of studies have already been conducted on LGBT youth experiences, the risks and challenges faced by the youth including their coping mechanisms, to address a gap in the literature, this research aims to explore beyond exploring the complex and various ways young people build an understanding of their identities, their experiences, and the social contexts in which they are engaged, as well as the different ways that contribute to development of LGBT youth in developing their personal characteristics as valued member of the society, the support and love from their family, peer and community and eventually understanding how such experienced either positively or negatively impact their academic performances.

This is supported by Horn, et. al., (2009) which provides that exploring the paradigm to consider the role of context in the lives of LGBT youth, we can begin to determine not only social context shape the complex and nuanced ways that LGBT youth live, but also the ways that individual characteristics affect the ways that LGBT youth deal with and experience their social world.

METHODS

This study used the descriptive qualitative research design through an in-depth interview. It also utilized the focus group discussion to elicit responses from identified participants selected through purposive sampling covering participants.

Research instrument involved face-to-face interviews, which consist of two parts and focus group discussion consisting of 10 respondents thru a round table interview where respondents took turn in answering the questions when they are required to do so. Open ended questions are also utilized in order to confirm or support other responses as they emerged and they were also encouraged to communicate with other respondents.

Thematic analysis was used to understand lived experiences, responses and coping mechanisms

of LGBT. The researcher gathered emerging clusters or themes and formed an idea of an experiences, responses and coping mechanisms of LGBT youth.

RESULTS

A. Challenges Experienced and Responses to Disclosure by the LGBT youth

Disclosure of sexual orientation and/or gender identity is a milestone event for lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) youth and *can* have both positive and negative. Coming out of one's sexual identity to family can be a challenging experience and may lead to acceptance or rejection. LGBT youth still experience homophobic bullying in school and discrimination in community. Russell (2016), including both results from 18 studies, show that sexual-minority youths experience significantly more bullying and higher levels of school-based victimization compared to heterosexual peers. (Felipe, et.al., 2018)

Respondents claimed that they experienced differing challenges when they came out as LGBT which led to their running away from home because of family rejection. The findings also showed that peer deviance is strongly related to adolescents' decision to run away, aside from problems brought about by social network characteristics and their own deviant and conventional attitudes, parental association, and school bonding. (Chen, X., Thrane, L., & Adams, M. (2012). However, others indicated that they experienced family acceptance (Ben-Ari 1995a; Takács, 2006); Goldstein 2009). Another challenge an LGBT youth encountered is homophobic bullying in which respondent indicated that their peers used religion for homophobic attacks according to Letsoala (2016). Also they experienced discrimination when they encountered detachment or losing of friends as a result (Takács, 2006).

B. Responses of Family, School and Community

There are various responses received by LGBT youth in their family, school and community when they came out in the open.

Results of the study showed that few of the participants received negative reactions from family members where typical reactions of family was a

demand to go back to normal. (Takács, 2006). Surprisingly, most of the participants received positive reactions from family members where families have shown support of their gender preferences instead. Further, participants indicated that they received positive responses from school environment such as acceptance according to Dau & Strauss (2016) while only few indicated that they received negative reactions such as homophobic bullying. (Mayock et.al., 2009). In addition, participants reported positive responses from the community such as acceptance while considerably few others experienced negative responses such as discrimination where respondents indicated losing of friends as a result (Takacs, 2006).

One respondent claimed that parents are far too often protective of them and that explains why parents' initial reactions were negative when they learned of their child's gender preference. This is further claimed in a study according to Katz-Wise, et.al., (2016) where it is said that possible parental responses to child's sexual identity or orientation, especially when it deviates from their usual expectation is somehow related to the child's attachment to them. Parents who value the child as a unique individual although may be surprised and concerned by the child's sexual minority orientation, gender non-conformity, or transgender identity, are likely to accept or come to terms through their negative attitudes over time and continue to be supportive to their child.

Respondents claimed that most responses from family and community may have been largely affected by culture and family values as well. Belonging to a religious family, respondents claimed, had been one of the major influences why their parents have not been so accepting or welcoming of their sexual identities and gender non-conformities in the first place.

In study investigating traditional values and family acceptance of sexual minorities, families with a strong emphasis on traditional values such as giving importance to religion or giving high regards to marriage as a sacred sacrament, were perceived as less accepting of sexual minority orientation than less traditional families. (Katz-Wise, et.al., 2016)

C. How these Responses Affect the LGBT Youth in their Academic Performances

The responses elicited from family, school and community differ according to how the different groups reacted to the LGBT youth disclosure. These responses somehow affected them in their academic performance in school.

Findings of the study indicated that LGBT affected their academic performance in a positive way shown by their active engagement in classes and in extra-curricular activities and having good grades according to Moore and Gonyea (1900) and GLSEN's National Climate Survey (2011).

Respondents claimed to have received strong support from school and teachers as well. According to them, this fact may be attributed to their active and responsive engagement in school activities, academic and extra-curricular which lead them to achieving good grades as a result. This outcome leads to recent findings which provides that LGBT negative perceptions of the campus climate do not hinder their involvement in educational and extra-curricular activities. It can be concluded then that LGBT students are academically committed and active as much as or more than their heterosexual peers. Evidently, campus climate appears to be variable for LGBTQ students depending on how open they are of their identities, and what their support system is like because this may eventually also impact their experience in the classroom and involvement in the campus. (Tetreault, et. al., 2013)

LGBT youth claimed that amidst differing responses to them, it is believed that their confessing to sexual orientation or preference greatly affected their academic performance but in a positive way shown by their active engagement in classes and in extra-curricular activities and excellent performance in school. Not much has been made in the research as to the negative consequences that a hostile climate may bring on LGBT students' access to education and academic opportunities. It is claimed further that experiences of victimization can negatively affect LGBT youths' access to education, as they are linked to increased absenteeism due to feeling uncomfortable or unsafe in school, increased discipline problems, and lower levels of school engagement and academic achievement (Kosciw et al., 2010; Murdock & Bolch, 2005). Respondents

claimed to have not been able to experience any of these due to the fact that the school through the teachers and their peers have positively supported their sexual preferences.

D. Coping Mechanisms

As a result of the study, it is shown that students who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender too often find that their schooling experiences is marred by bullying, discrimination, physical or even sexual assault. Generally, they too often find themselves either affected positively or negatively depending on how they managed to surpass the challenges brought about by the stigma of their sexual preferences.

Despite the challenges experienced and negative responses received by LGBT youth, there were strategies or mechanisms which enabled them to cope with the challenges. LGBT youth found comfort from LGBT friends who showed their support thru advices and helpful gestures to them. Others chose to resort to ignoring negative reactions that they received from family, school and community in order to overcome the stigma brought about by coming out in the open. Respondents confirmed that they sought support from people who affirmed and valued their sexual identities. Simultaneously, many youths made active efforts to ignore or avoid circumstances that could result to being stigmatized, as well as avoiding physical locations, such as certain schools, towns, or churches where they may feel bullied or harassed. This is referred to as the situation selection which refers to approaching or avoiding situations based on anticipated emotional impact. (McDavitt, et. al., 2008)

Participants revealed that their coping mechanisms are inspired by support and helpful advices from LGBT friends in accordance with the claims of McDavitt (2008) and GoldBch and Gibbs (2015). Lastly, ignoring negative reactions also contributed to their coping and survival which finds support in the study of Compas et al., (2014) and Nadal et al., (2011) Respondents who encountered prejudicial statements directed at them often opted to ignore them. (McDavitt, et. al., 2008)

Further participants revealed that their coping mechanisms as inspired by support and helpful advices from LGBT friends and ignoring negative reactions as well also greatly contributed to

their coping and survival and to a certain extent, empowerment and self-reliance. McDavitt (2008) expressed that some respondents coped with heterosexism by building their personal sense of self-reliance and by cognitively reframing their own circumstances, they were able to partially ignore the negative feelings related with experiences of heterosexist rejection.

Results of the study revealed that family, school and the community had growing acceptance of the LGBT youth as to their gender preferences and sexual identities. As LGBT youth would find themselves to have been either positively or negatively affected by their coming out in the open, they still manage to survive the challenges brought about by the stigma of their sexual orientation and gender identities. Having developed these positive attitudes also prepared them to be unaffected personally and even perform better in school. These coping strategies somehow paved way for building their sense of confidence, self-reliance and empowerment.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORKS

With the varied responses, behaviors and attitudes of the people to LGBT, it can be derived from these that there is still a strong need to widen dissemination about LGBT youth and their rights. Still, it can also be said that there is a need for wider dissemination of awareness and increasing protection and recognition of LGBT youth rights in schools and community which will become a source of empowerment for many instead of creating a stigma and alienation. Also it is claimed by respondents that only when their rights are fully protected and recognized that one can claim that LGBT youth will find their experiences as mere challenges which they will try to overcome with positive attitudes and acceptance. Further, researches of these kinds may be made as basis for policy makers and school administrators to come up with school policies and regulations to further protect the rights of the LGBT youth in the future.

Future studies on this subject may be explored by considering other variables such as the possibility of focusing on the development of stronger In-school support to LGBT students,

inclusion of LGBT curriculum and other LGBT related support in addition to building a viable parental and community support system to them as well.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Informed consent from respondents were obtained and the researcher maintained confidentiality of the elicited responses from them with assurance that the data responses will be utilized solely for purposes of this study. Anonymity of respondents was also taken into consideration.

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